

## **Segment 5 – Leadership**

*Bev Showers is interviewed about the purpose and role of distributed leadership.*

*Interviewer:*

Doctor Showers, perhaps the most frequently asked questions relate to the component that is so critical to the professional development model—that of leadership. These kind of questions we often hear include: What is leadership’s purpose and role, how does administration support state and federal policies, while still attending to the needs of children in our districts and schools, and how does one develop patterns of distributed leadership and what is distributed leadership?

*Dr. Beverly Showers*

Okay, I’m going to take those in reverse order. I’d like to start with the notion of distributed leadership. And I’m aiming this particular notion straight at principals, because I think that in many cases, the principal has been saddled, if you will, with the entire responsibility for school improvement. There have been pretty strong messages coming from the field saying to principals: It’s on your shoulders. If this doesn’t work, it’s your fault. And there’s a real consensus in the field now that you cannot put all the responsibility on any one person’s shoulders, and that in fact, it requires distributed leadership, meaning up and down the chain of command, from the school board, and the superintendent, to the teacher leaders in the classrooms, to make this work well. By working well, I mean so that students are learning more, in the way we intended.

So distributed leadership provides very active roles for everyone. And so what is it? It means that the superintendent is not only helping forge a vision for the district on how they will function for all students, but communicating it fluidly to the board, to the community, to the entire staff, and frequently—so that everyone is clear—what are we about here? And the board has an enormous responsibility to translate that vision into action with resources as support and again by reaffirming that vision.

So I know we have all been in situations where we have seen school boards talk endlessly about, budget items, building renovation, painting the best tires, I mean, that’s a bit of an exaggeration, and that’s the job that they get saddled with, so I think that at the very top, it’s hardest for the board. By definition, they have to deal with the minutia of running school districts. But they’re also charged with maintaining the big ideas. They are the community’s representatives to oversee our vision for what we want for our children. So finding a balance there I think is very hard for boards, but if they don’t find it then that vision does not get communicated to the community, every two weeks, when they meet, or every month, when they meet.

So the superintendent and school board [role regarding] distributed leadership means they have to be helping from the top. Since superintendents, while they’re critical in creating a vision and maintaining a focus on that vision, they rarely actually care out a vision. They delegate everything, and it falls heavily on what we call middle management, or

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district level personnel, or AEA personnel, or DE personnel, to attend to the nuts and bolts of this vision.

So we want every child to be reading on grade level before they enter middle school, and for those who aren't—as they enter high school—we want a vigorous program to remediate quickly so we increase the chances they graduate. Say that's the vision. Then, we're the ones that have to put it in place, in the middle. You know, the supervisory staff, the training staff, the staff development staff, and there's a critical role in terms of leadership there. You can't wait for the principal to say, Do you have suggestions for how we collect implementation data that lets us know if we're getting something in place without burying us in an avalanche of paper? You know, offer suggestions. Everyone's got to be proactive, and take leadership. This is not the time to be overly "Rogerian"; [i.e.,] how do you feel about that? Throw in your ideas. We need everyone's expertise.

Then you get to the principalship. You get to the building level. The principal is the one who is directing, really, that entire staff development model, so if you look at this data collection and analysis, it's often the principal and a couple of lead teachers who will have the experience to do that. But it's got to be completely shared with an entire staff. The principal has to see that it happens. The principal is feeling a little bit shaky on his own, or her own, statistics, then get the help that's needed. It's still going to fall on the principal's shoulders. Make sure you start with good information or everything else you do is kind of futile.

Then setting a focus, the principal is making a collaborative decision, and this is one of those times that the principal may have to back off. The principal has to get the information out and say, our students have pretty pressing needs in these two areas. We've identified appropriate content. One of these is going to take twice as many resources as the other. So I'm going to lay off the pros and cons, and the staff needs to decide. It's not like they're choosing between a good option and a bad option. They simply have to set some priorities so that they don't kill themselves in a single year, and they know they've got something on their plates that's doable. The principal has to guide that.

The training? This is probably a new one. The principal needs to sit in with any governing group, with trainers, and say "This is what we need". This is what we want to see happening in this training. Pull proactively from trainers, what you need in your school, or in your schools, if several schools are cooperating around an initiative. Don't sit there passively and let the trainer bring to you whatever the trainer decided you needed. The principal needs to make sure that's happening. That doesn't mean the principal has to do everything, but in this model, they're responsible for seeing that it happens. So delegate it, if necessary. The principal should participate in the training. And in a staff development model like this, I think there's nothing more awkward than a principal who does not participate in training, and a month into the initiative is responsible for evaluating teachers, all of whom are more knowledgeable than the principal about what they're doing. So I would say to principals, as part of your leadership function, do not let yourself be put in that position. Don't let that happen.

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Then when we get into that whole action research cycle, inside the model, where we're meeting regularly as collaborative teams making implementation plans, developing lessons, looking at student data, repeating that whole cycle—be an active participant in that, especially around the data piece. Many teachers aren't accustomed to handling this much data, and you're going to need to model it, help with it, be sure that it's disseminated to staff, to parents. Take an active role in that. If you do all of those things, from a leadership position as a principal, you're being a good educational leader.

I left teacher leaders for last on this, but anyone who thinks they can implement anything in classrooms without teachers, by formal edict somewhere up the line, is living in a dream world. That's wishful thinking. Teachers have to be so involved with every step of the way, because that's where it's going to happen. It will happen in the classroom, and your implementation especially, completely depends on teacher leaders to monitor that and say, "You know what, our students need more work with fluency. We're not moving this. You know what, our student sight vocabulary is not keeping abreast of where it should. Especially in the disciplines. In subject area." So, it's your teacher leaders that are going to do that, and actually now I believe that I have answered your first two questions. That's what distributive leadership is, and that's what needs to happen all up and down the line.